

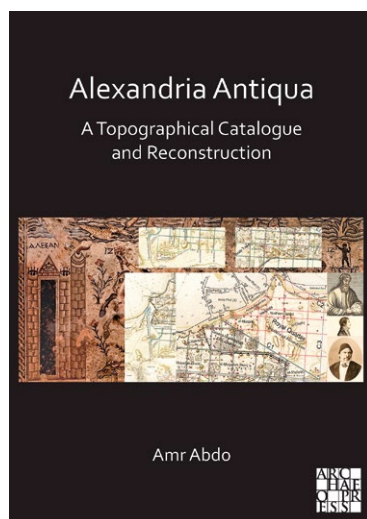
Book review

Amr Abdo, *Alexandria Antiqua. A topographical catalogue and reconstruction*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2022; ISBN 978-1-78969-943-2 (print); ISBN 978-1-78969-944-9 (e-Pdf); 378 pages, 246 figures

Anyone involved in archaeological research on Alexandria will welcome this latest publication with great interest. Following in the wake of Stefan Riedel's *Die Basileia von Alexandria. Topographisch-urbanistische Untersuchungen Zum Ptolemaisch Königsviertel* (Brepols, 2020) is this new study of the topography of Alexandria, which covers both the city and its suburban districts. Appearing almost 30 years after Barbara Tkaczow's *The topography of ancient Alexandria (archaeological map)* (Warsaw, 1993), Amr Abdo's book brings an excellent opportunity to reflect on and take stock of recent achievements in the field.

The irreparable loss of the material legacy of the ancient city, buried under the modern town, is something science has had to deal with from the beginning of regular archaeological research. "Etiam periere ruinae" wrote Evaristo Breccia not without reason, citing Lucian in his description of the state of Alexandria's monuments almost a century ago. Awareness of this never leaves the author and is even reflected in the foreword by Kyriakos Savvopoulos. It makes the book all the more valuable.

The study comprises three main thematic chapters, preceded by an introduction and summed up in the conclusions. Despite the fragmentariness of available archaeological material, of which he is deeply aware, the author's goal is a challenging "comprehensive, up-to-date topographical catalogue and reconstruction of Alexandria in antiquity", from the founding of the city



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to the Arab conquest. His methodology is geared to this objective: he confronts the evidence from the ancient written sources against the results of archaeological fieldwork, the oldest 19th-century excavations and the modern projects, mutually complementing the data. The volume is richly illustrated: 346 figures treated as an integral part of the study—this is certainly a strong point of this publication. The results of the topographical discussion are presented in five city plans (Figs 77–81), presenting a reconstruction of the ancient street grid plotted on a topographical plan prepared in the course of the Napoleonic expedition and published in *Description de l’Égypte*. The plans refer to successive phases in Alexandria’s history from the end of the 4th century BCE through the 7th century CE. The QR code included with the plans is a commendable solution, allowing easy direct on-line access to the AutoCAD format of these plans.

The introduction brings more than one would customarily anticipate. It contains a concise but extremely useful overview of all stages of research to date, which is tantamount to a full set of available sources for the study of ancient urban topography. It starts with Renaissance plans and vedutas, through the Napoleonic expedition to Mahmud Bey el-Falaki’s undoubtedly breakthrough research. The overview ends with a description of modern work carried out by the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities, Centre d’Études Alexandrines, Institut Européen d’Archéologie Sous-Marine, the Hellenic Institute of Ancient and Medieval Alexandrian Studies and the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw.

Chapter I, “Context of foundation”, briefly introduces this extremely complex issue which is based mainly on information from the written sources. The author takes into consideration the geomorphological context, discussing its impact on the initial urban layout. The few written sources that exist on this subject are an important element of the narrative and it is a pity that the author did not choose to enter into a broader critique of these sources.

The next chapter, “Urban layout”, is more complex in its structure and content. Starting it is a detailed analysis of the course of the city walls, one of the key issues that is still far from being settled (pp. 10–22). In keeping with his methodological assumptions, the author discusses the known sections of the defenses in succession, by historical period, confronting the data with historical accounts. These nine archaeological sites with alleged remains of fortifications, scattered throughout the city, have been known for years, but the author’s discussion and conclusions in many cases expand on the accepted views on the subject. This is especially true of the southwestern section of the fortifications. The author makes use in equal measure of archaeological data, ancient sources and maps, modern travelers’ accounts and even Arabic sources. It is commendable that he reaches beyond a mere reconstruction of the line of defenses, devoting considerable attention to building technique, especially the use of *opus caementicium* in their construction.

The street grid of ancient Alexandria, unsurprisingly, takes up a lion’s share of the chapter (pp. 22–41). The archaeological data available in this case is much

more substantial, although hardly satisfactory. The author relies primarily on the archaeological findings of el-Falaki, Friedrich Noack, Breccia and Achilles Adriani. This well-ordered and exceptionally detailed discussion of the findings will surely be appreciated by all researchers interested in the topography of the ancient city. In his narrative, Amr Abdo emphasizes the oft forgotten fact that in many places el-Falaki's street grid refers to different, sometimes quite distant periods in the history of the site. Some of these streets run over the ruined and levelled relics of Ptolemaic architecture. The author advocates a multi-phased evolution of the original street grid, indicating at the same time the existence of districts where the grid departs from a canonical orthogonal orientation in favor of an orientation in line with the cardinal geographic directions as, for example, in the royal district or on Kom el-Dikka (site of the Polish excavations). In the course of the discussion, Amr Abdo also takes into consideration the street surface, from beaten tracks with earth and gravel in the 3rd–2nd centuries BCE to the more permanent stone-paved roads from the start of the 1st century CE.

The third and last issue covered in this chapter is the waterways and harbor infrastructure (pp. 41–51). This aspect of the research is an excellent illustration of the progress made in Alexandrian archaeology over the past few decades thanks to the application of modern research methods. One cannot but agree with the author regarding the sensational findings of the CEAlex and IEASM underwater archaeological teams, which have provided new insights into coastal

topography, the layout of Alexandrian harbors and the Heptastadium. The latter in particular exemplifies the potential of a modern research instrumentarium. Noninvasive electrical resistivity surveys have yielded results allowing for a fundamental correction of the course of the Heptastadium. The revised location of this causeway as an extension of street R9 (contrary to existing views) fits perfectly into the regular orthogonal Hippodamian street plan, confirming yet again a fully effective urban layout with two main, parallel cross streets (R1 and R9) intersecting the main artery (Via Canopica) at its opposite ends.

The most extensive Chapter 3, “Cityscape”, covers the main public buildings and the necropolises. In this discussion, the author drops the chronological criterion in favor of a topographical approach. He discusses altogether 126 sites located in eight arbitrarily distinguished districts, encompassing the city itself as well as the suburban areas, each in a diachronic view. One should note the exhaustive treatment of the cemeteries outside the city walls, starting with the earliest discoveries at Anfushy and Gabbari and ending on the Stagni hypogeum uncovered in 1989 (pp. 57–73). Many of these sites, like the Ras el-Tin necropolis, are no longer accessible, many have been destroyed. The burial grounds on the eastern fringes of the city are given equal attention, from Chatby and el-Hadra investigated in the early 20th century (pp. 141–152) to Mustapha Pasha and the newest SCA excavations in the district of Ibrahimiya.

The catalog covers other buildings as well, the anonymous ones and those known only from historical accounts.

Hence an extensive passus on the Lighthouse (pp. 53–56), the Serapeum and the Soma (pp. 150–152), to mention only the most important ones.

Any overview of Alexandrian public buildings invariably raises the question of the location of its emblematic buildings: the Museion and the Library. Like several other researchers before him, Amr Abdo rejects the interpretation of the inscription “Dioscourides 3 volumes” on a granite block, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna, as a container for papyrus rolls. Breaking with this idea, still frequently cited in the literature on the subject, obviously dismisses any argument locating the Library at the findspot of the block. It is then with some surprise—all the more so that no rationale is given by the author—that one reads of a presumed link between the block and a complex of late antique lecture halls discovered at the Kom el-Dikka site lying a few hundred meters away (pp. 87–88).

Virtually all the sites from the town itself are presented in the text, those with meaningful finds of architecture as well as those yielding only isolated finds. Easy reference to the plans included in the volume facilitates the localization of all of the sites, which is of paramount importance for any future topographical considerations. Not always, however, is a precise localization of a find possible, because most of the recorded sites refer to research or even chance discoveries made in the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, when Alexandria was booming. All the architectural descriptions are accompanied by appropriate plans, eliminating the need to reach for the source publications.

Epigraphic monuments are given great importance in the publication, which is of considerable significance in view of the exceptionally modest number of such finds from Alexandria compared to other ancient cities. Moreover, the texts are cited in extenso, although not always with a translation.

In the closing chapter of the book, “Conclusions”, the author sums up the most important findings on the urban development of Alexandria. A new look at the eastern boundaries of the ancient city in the Ptolemaic period is an important component of these findings. The author emphasizes yet again the independent orientation of the architecture in the royal district and the reconstructed run of the defenses in this area, which effectively differentiates his hypothesis (Fig. 77, AutoCAD map V1) from el-Falaki’s reconstruction. Nonetheless, his next argument in favor of his ideas, underlining the propagandist role of an orientation compliant with the geographical directions legitimizing Alexander’s rule by referring to the traditional Egyptian orientation, is in need of a deeper discussion. Amr Abdo uses an overly symbolic but telling term—“*Basileia ad Alexandream*”—to emphasize the separation and distinctiveness of the topography of the royal district in relation to the urban fabric of the rest of the city. At the same time he subscribes to the view that the framework for the orthogonal street network proposed by el-Falaki was already in place in the Hellenistic period.

A site index, a rather fundamental tool in the case of a catalog, making it easier to use, is unfortunately missing

from this publication. This shortcoming is not corrected by a detailed listing of the content of each chapter. An attentive reader would certainly also appreciate a concordance table between the site designations used in this volume and those used earlier by Adriani and Tkaczow.

Emphasizing yet again his “holistic approach”, combining fieldwork made increasingly more difficult in a bustling modern city with a perusal of ancient

written sources, the author accepts the challenge facing Alexandrian archaeology. The book he has produced shows his approach to be the right one: even with such a limited amount of data, often considered as outdated, it is still possible to reach new and inspiring conclusions. The result is a well prepared catalog, which while not free of some minor faults, is nevertheless an extremely useful compendium of up-to-date knowledge about the topography of ancient Alexandria.

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How to cite this article: Majcherek, G. (2022).

Book review: Amr Abdo, *Alexandria Antiqua*.

A topographical catalogue and reconstruction. Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean, 31 (pp. 537–541)

<https://doi.org/10.37343/uw.2083-537X.pam31.18>

